

## Rosh Hashanna

# Shofar – Facing Uncertainty

The Shofar is veiled in a certain mystery. The Torah fails to reveal its precise intentions when it instructs us to sound the Shofar on Rosh Hashanna. All we hear from the Torah is a vague description of Rosh Hashanna as “Yom Teruah”<sup>1</sup> or “Zichron Teruah”<sup>2</sup> but how are we to interpret those phrases?

In our study this year, we are going to look at a few leads from Chazal as to the sources for Tekiat Shofar. I think that we shall emerge with an interesting angle upon this familiar ritual.

### THE SHOFAR AND WAR

The Shofar is frequently mentioned in the context of war. In the Torah:

“When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound the Teruah on the trumpets that you may be remembered before the Lord your God and be delivered from your enemies.”<sup>3</sup>

This war context continues in Chazal. The Mishna in Rosh Hashanna proves the identity of the Shofar from the battle against Jericho<sup>4</sup>. But what aspect of war are we relating to? Is it the triumphant victory of war? The fear of the battlefield? How would we define the function that the shofar is to play, how would we categorise the emotion that the Shofar should evoke?

### SISERA'S MOTHER

For an answer, we shall turn to the Gemara. One of the most unusual proofs for the sound of the Shofar comes from the biblical figure of the mother of Sisera. The Gemara is trying to identify the correct sound that a shofar should make and is interested in defining the word Teruah”:

“The Torah states: ‘It shall be a day of Teruah for you.’ The Targum translates the phrase as ‘Yom Yevava - a day of sobbing’ based on the verse: ‘At the window Sisera’s mother looked out, and cried’<sup>5</sup>.” (Talmud. Rosh Hashanna 33b)

Who is Sisera and who is his mother? Why should Sisera’s mother become the source for the sounds of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanna?

The scene is the military victory of the Israelite army, under the leadership of Devora and Barak ben Avinoam. The enemy is Sisera, a formidable army commander who has wrought havoc for years in the north of Israel. Now God has assisted Am Yisrael. Sisera’s army is defeated and Sisera is dead. But Sisera’s mother doesn’t know this. Sisera’s mother awaits his arrival. The prophet Devora tells the story in the following way:

“Through the window peered Sisera’s mother,  
Behind the lattice she sobbed:

‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
Why so late the clatter of his wheels’  
She too replies to herself:  
‘They must be dividing the spoils,  
A damsel or two for each man...’ (Shoftim 5:28-30)

Sisera’s mother is crying. Why? That morning her beloved son went out to battle. She expects him to come home at a particular time, victorious, just like every other battle that he had fought in the past. Sisera had never suffered defeat. Today, Sisera is late home. Why? The possibilities gnaw at her mind. She paces up and down, staring repeatedly out of the window, squinting into the distance for a distant image, a cloud of dust, which may signify the approach of his chariot. Hours go by and she hears nothing. No word. “They must be dividing the spoils” she says to herself, in attempt to reassure herself. But it is just an excuse. She knows that. All the worst scenarios are running uncontrollably through her mind. Where could he be? Could he have suffered defeat? Or maybe he is just choosing himself a new maid from the captive women? Or maybe, possibly ... what? Sisera’s mother cannot withstand the tension. She bursts into a flood of tears.

We have all experienced it as kids. Our parents yelling at us because we arrived home late, a few hours after the time they had expected us. We have all been at the receiving end of those impassioned speeches about how our mothers were “worried sick,” phoning the neighbours etc.

What is that feeling?

I would put it in the following way<sup>6</sup>. It is the feeling of absolute uncertainty. It is the emotional turmoil of endless possibilities. You know, we all know how to cope when we know what has happened. If someone is in hospital, if a person has a car crash, we then have the ability to cope. We know how to deal with the insurance, the doctors etc. But the situation of not knowing, of the endless possibilities, somehow manifests itself in frantic worry, a panicked rush of thoughts, the worst thoughts. This state is truly unbearable. For some reason, when we sense a situation in which we entertain the possibility of the worst, but we don’t yet know what has really happened, we are consumed with an unexplainable sense of dread. The experience of waiting for the doctor’s diagnosis, for sensitive medical test results, is far more difficult than coping with the results, however good or bad.

Sisera’s mother is experiencing that traumatic feeling of uncertainty, with its dark guesswork; the overwhelming sense of the unknown. These are her tears.

And this too is the voice of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanna. When the books of life and death are open before us, and we are standing in judgement, all the options are open. What is God thinking about us? What shall my fate be this year? We stand on Rosh Hashanna in an uncertain twilight zone hanging suspended between guilt and innocence, between life and death. This uncertainty, this lack of knowledge is the embodiment of tension on Rosh Hashanna. We cry, just like

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 29:1

<sup>2</sup> Vayikra 23:24

<sup>3</sup> Bamidbar 10:9

<sup>4</sup> Rosh Hashanna 3:1

<sup>5</sup> Sefer Shoftim 5:28

<sup>6</sup> I heard the approach that I have adopted here from Rabbi Josh Berman of Beit Shemesh.

Sisera's mother. And if we do not cry, the Shofar cries for us.

## PART II - A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE MISHNA

But is our position on Rosh Hashanna one of paralysed helplessness? Are we required to stand frozen inactive, or is there a more active role that one can play?

To answer this question, I would like to study a perek of Mishna together. By surveying the development of theme within the Mishna<sup>7</sup>, I hope that we will be able to sense some of Chazal's thinking regarding the philosophy behind the Shofar.

Here is the text of the Mishna in the third chapter of Massechet Rosh Hashanna:

**Mishna 2<sup>8</sup>:** All kinds of Shofar are valid (for Rosh Hashanna) except that of a cow because it is a "horn." R. Yossi said: But are not all shofarot referred to as a "horn"? – as it states: When they sound a long blast with the ram's horn. (Joshua 6:5)

**3.** The Shofar of Rosh Hashanna was of a wild goat, straight, and its mouthpiece was overlaid with gold. There were two trumpets at the sides. The Shofar sounded a long note, but the trumpets a shorter one, for the mitzva of the day is the Shofar.

**6<sup>9</sup>.** A shofar that is split and was glued back together, is unfit. A Shofar which shattered into pieces and is glued together is unfit. If there was a hole in the shofar and it was filled in, if it hinders the sound of the blast of the Shofar, then it is unfit. But if not, it is valid.

**7.** If someone blew a shofar into a well, or an underground room<sup>10</sup> or into a large cask, and one heard the sound of the shofar, one has fulfilled his obligation. But if he heard the sound of the echo, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

Likewise, if one was passing by a synagogue, or if his house was close to the synagogue and he heard the sound of the shofar or the reading of the Megilla; if he concentrated his mind on it, he has fulfilled his obligation. If not, he has not carried out his duty. Even though they both heard the sound, this one focused his mind, whereas the other person did not.

<sup>7</sup> The method that I will use here is a literary one. The assumption here is that Rebbi, when editing the Mishna, composed the perakim in a particular order according to certain themes. The literary structure of the Mishna is a relatively new field but it is one that I have been drawn to over the past year. In our study of the Written Torah, we are familiar with the usage of literary methods, developing Torah thoughts from the very structure of parshiot, the literary development of theme, and the use of language. Similarly, I believe that despite the Halakhic nature of the Mishna, we can identify certain philosophical and religious motifs via the very fabric of the ordering of the Mishna. For more on this line of thinking, see the series of articles in the periodical Netuim, by Rabbi Avie Walfish.

<sup>8</sup> The first Mishna of the chapter deals with the ceremony of the sanctification of the new moon and is not relevant to the theme of Shofar.

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of brevity, I have skipped two Mishnayot which digress to talk about the blowing of the shofar on fast days etc. They continue the discussion regarding the relationship between the shofar and the trumpets.

<sup>10</sup> See the Ritva who suggests that this happened during the Bar Kochba rebellion when the Jews had to hide in secret underground passages to escape the attention of the Romans. Historians have verified that this is the historical context of our Mishna.

**8.** "And it was that when Moshe held up his hands Israel prevailed and when he lowered his hands Amalek prevailed." (Shemot 17:11) But could the hands of Moses win a war or lose a war? Rather it comes to tell you that whenever Israel looked upwards and committed their hearts to their father in heaven, they prevailed, and if not, they fell...."

This is the essence of the chapter of Mishna that outlines the laws of Shofar. Let us examine this chapter and try to understand its content.

We shall begin with the most prominent question that this chapter raises: What is the final Mishna (8) doing here? How does it relate to the Shofar? It is a nice drash but it would seem to have little connection with the command of sounding the Shofar. Is this true?

I would claim that the key to answering this question is to identify the structural pattern that underlies the chapter as a whole. The Mishnayot here are ordered in a particular way that reflects the thinking behind the mitzva of Shofar. Let us elaborate.

### CONCRETE TO ABSTRACT

The Mishnayot are structured in a particular order. Note how the Mishna progresses thematically.

Mishna 2 :	The origin of the Shofar
Mishna 3-5:	The appearance of the Shofar
Mishna 6:	The physical Shofar : does it have to be a single unit?
Mishna 7a:	The sound of the Shofar (Objective): - Authentic sound or echo?
Mishna 7b:	The sound of the Shofar (Subjective.): - the question of concentration

Through this simple breakdown, we can identify the journey that the Mishna takes us through. We begin with the physical, and we end with the ephemeral. Note how the Mishnayot begin with the origins of the shofar, then progressing to its physical appearance and its physical integrity. Our attention then shifts higher, away from the physical object that is the shofar, to its sound, and the degree to which that sound is heard with accuracy. But the Mishna progresses further to a higher level; to the effect that the shofar sound has upon the listener and the degree to which the listener is connecting with the sound. The Mishna raises the question: Is the listener focusing upon the notes he is hearing? Is he concentrating upon the sound?

All the Mishnayot are attempting to determine and circumscribe the correct and valid performance of Tekiat Shofar, however there is a progression. It is a movement from the concrete to the abstract, from the objective to the subjective. This is the way that the Mishna orders the perek.

Now, upon the backdrop of this analysis, we may be able to understand Mishna 8.

We read Mishna 7 and we develop an understanding that one must have a certain "Kavanna" in order to fulfill the Mitzva of Shofar. At a simple level, we can see this mental focus as a basic need for the fulfilment of any Mitzva. But especially with Shofar, which is performed by somebody else, the person hearing the shofar must be aware that the sounds he is hearing are indeed a Shofar and that through the hearing of the sounding of these Shofar sounds he will

be fulfilling a Torah obligation. Indeed, this is how the Mishna should be perceived.

#### WAR IN THE BALANCE.

Mishna 8 however, takes things further. It gives us an image of a nation at war. They, an untrained slave army face a formidable foe – Amalek. What is the key to their success? It is the focus which they have. If they focus their minds upon God and their commitment to Him, then they win. If they lose sight of God, then the tables turn and they begin to flounder. Kavanna is the key. But here Kavanna is not the technical awareness of obligation or the understanding that the sounds are those of the Shofar. Rather, the Kavanna here is an orientation of commitment and subjugation to God, a realization that when the future lies in the balance, our success relies upon God.

This brings us full circle to our opening image of Sisera's mother. Here again, everything is up for grabs. The future is unknown and undetermined. What will be the deciding factor as to which way the war will go?

In our Mishna, the deciding factor is whether the nation will have their minds fixated upon God. Where will their Kavanna be?

#### THE MISSING PIECE

Maybe this Mishna provides the missing piece in the puzzle which is Shofar. The Mishna has discussed the physical attributes of the Shofar, and its sound. But how does that sound produce an effect of "Zikaron<sup>11</sup>" before God? How does the Shofar connect with God at all?

Our Mishna presents a classic scene. There are three "actors", three players: 1. Moses, 2.the people, and 3.God. The people need saving. Their future existence lies in the balance. By Moses' symbolic raising of hands, they are directed to connect their hearts to God. This brings them sure success.

In our shul there are also 3 "actors": 1.The Ba'al Tokea, 2.the people, the congregation, and 3.God. The imagery is totally parallel. The people's future lies in the balance, undetermined at this point. The people stand in shul on Yom HaDin – "at war" – fighting for life and success rather than defeat, death, calamity. God is the key to their success. How do they achieve this effect however? It is simple. The Ba'al Tokeah by virtue of his shofar directs the people's minds and hearts to God. If this is effective the people are saved.

I even feel that the visual imagery is similar. Moses on a mountain, above everyone, but surrounded by them, holds up his hands. And the Ba'al Tokea, on the Bima in shul, a little above everyone, but surrounded by them, directing the hearts of the community towards heaven.

#### IN SUMMARY.

We have presented two images of the Shofar. One represents the problem. The other gives a direction for a solution.

The Shofar as pictured in the image of Sisera's mother represents the desperation and tension that pervades in a situation in which "the books of life and death are open" before God. Where our future is unknown, an intense feeling of trepidation holds sway.

Our second image is the understanding of the imagery of Moshe in the war of Amalek and its relationship to Shofar. With this understanding, we can see the Shofar as a

compass, directing our hearts and minds, our heartfelt prayers and our desperate pleas, heavenwards to God, directly. In this image, a certain reassurance prevails, whereby we feel that if only we can hold our focus, if only the Shofar will direct our minds, then we are certain that the outcome will be a positive one, that we will emerge from the uncertainty to a future of life and progress.

In conclusion, let us only pray that uncertainty will herald life and that our current confusion will lead to peace. May the Shofar, guide us towards true prayer, and may God hear our prayers.

Shanna Tova

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<sup>11</sup> See sources in footnote 2 and 3 above.